

How Autism Freed Me to be Myself

By Rosie King
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In this transcription of a TED Talk, 16-year-old Rosie King shares her experiences with autism and how it has uniquely shaped her worldview. Additionally, King explores the desire people have to be "normal," and the effects that this desire can have. As you read, note how King describes her autism compared to how others view her.

- [1] I haven't told many people this, but in my head, I've got thousands of secret worlds all going on all at the same time. I am also autistic.

People tend to diagnose autism with really specific check-box descriptions, but in reality, it's a whole variation as to what we're like. For instance, my little brother, he's very severely autistic. He's nonverbal. He can't talk at all. But I love to talk. People often associate autism with liking maths and science and nothing else, but I know so many autistic people who love being creative. But that is a stereotype,¹ and the stereotypes of things are often, if not always, wrong. For instance, a lot of people think autism and think "Rain Man"² immediately. That's the common belief, that every single autistic person is Dustin Hoffman, and that's not true.

But that's not just with autistic people, either. I've seen it with LGBTQ people, with women, with POC³ people. People are so afraid of variety that they try to fit everything into a tiny little box with really specific labels. This is something that actually happened to me in real life: I googled "autistic people are..." and it comes up with suggestions as to what you're going to type. I googled "autistic people are..." and the top result was "demons." That is the first thing that people think when they think autism. [Jokingly:] They know. (Laughter)



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1. a widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing
2. This is a reference to a movie in which the main character (played by Dustin Hoffman) was an autistic man who had an incredible memory and was great at math, but struggled with basic social skills.
3. an abbreviation for person of color

One of the things I can do because I'm autistic — it's an ability rather than a disability — is I've got a very, very vivid imagination. Let me explain it to you a bit. It's like I'm walking in two worlds most of the time. There's the real world, the world that we all share, and there's the world in my mind, and the world in my mind is often so much more real than the real world. Like, it's very easy for me to let my mind loose because I don't try and fit myself into a tiny little box. That's one of the best things about being autistic. You don't have the urge to do that. You find what you want to do, you find a way to do it, and you get on with it. If I was trying to fit myself into a box, I wouldn't be here, I wouldn't have achieved half the things that I have now. There are problems, though. There are problems with being autistic, and there are problems with having too much imagination. School can be a problem in general, but having also to explain to a teacher on a daily basis that their lesson is inexplicably dull and you are secretly taking refuge⁴ in a world inside your head in which you are not in that lesson, that adds to your list of problems. (Laughter) Also, when my imagination takes hold, my body takes on a life of its own. When something very exciting happens in my inner world, I've just got to run. I've got to rock backwards and forwards, or sometimes scream. This gives me so much energy, and I've got to have an outlet for all that energy. But I've done that ever since I was a child, ever since I was a tiny little girl. And my parents thought it was cute, so they didn't bring it up, but when I got into school, they didn't really agree that it was cute. It can be that people don't want to be friends with the girl that starts screaming in an algebra lesson. And this doesn't normally happen in this day and age, but it can be that people don't want to be friends with the autistic girl. It can be that people don't want to associate with anyone who won't or can't fit themselves into a box that's labeled normal. But that's fine with me, because it sorts the wheat from the chaff,⁵ and I can find which people are genuine and true and I can pick these people as my friends.

- [5] But if you think about it, what is normal? What does it mean? Imagine if that was the best compliment you ever received. "Wow, you are really normal." (Laughter) But compliments are, "you are extraordinary" or "you step outside the box." It's "you're amazing." So if people want to be these things, why are so many people striving to be normal? Why are people pouring their brilliant individual light into a mold? People are so afraid of variety that they try and force everyone, even people who don't want to or can't, to become normal. There are camps for LGBTQ people or autistic people to try and make them this "normal," and that's terrifying that people would do that in this day and age.

All in all, I wouldn't trade my autism and my imagination for the world. Because I am autistic, I've presented documentaries to the BBC,⁶ I'm in the midst of writing a book, I'm doing this — this is fantastic — and one of the best things that I've achieved, that I consider to have achieved, is I've found ways of communicating with my little brother and sister, who as I've said are nonverbal. They can't speak. And people would often write off someone who's nonverbal, but that's silly, because my little brother and sister are the best siblings that you could ever hope for. They're just the best, and I love them so much and I care about them more than anything else. I'm going to leave you with one question: If we can't get inside the person's minds, no matter if they're autistic or not, instead of punishing anything that strays from normal, why not celebrate uniqueness and cheer every time someone unleashes their imagination?

Thank you.

(Applause)

4. **Refuge** (*noun*): shelter or protection from danger

5. a phrase meaning to separate things or people that are of high quality from those that are not

6. British Broadcasting Corporation